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Racist Elevator Inspectors, Consumer-Driven Zombies, and
the Sardonicism That Mocks Them Both in Colson
Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*

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Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* took me six months to finish reading, as these books require attention to detail and a willingness to be confused. Whitehead works hard to create an uncomfortable shift from literary to genre fiction and back. Done to focus on social justice issues within the science fiction genres of his books, he dares to question the status quo in society and in literature. He hides his motives, making me hunt for the meaning; he decided to write fiction instead of academic commentary on race and capitalism for a reason, just finding that reason proves challenging. The uncomfortability that I had while reading these books hinges on Whitehead's use of the sardonic to create worlds that are hard to understand.

The Intuitionist revolves around the story of Lila Mae Watson, an elevator inspector in a large city where a battle between two rival factions of inspectors with Lila Mae caught in the middle. Lila Mae belongs to the Intuitionism faction, which uses spiritual-like experiences to examine elevators' inside components that come alive at the inspector's touch; and its inverse, Empiricism, works with elevators in a way more akin to reality's inspection of the machines since they look at the mechanics of the machines. Empiricists call Intuitionists "swamis, voodoo men, juju heads, witch doctors", which the book declares as "all terms belonging to the nomenclature of dark exotica, the sinister foreign" (Whitehead 57-58). Positioning Empiricism and Intuitionism in opposition, *The Intuitionist* aims to reflect the segregation of the Jim Crow era. In this literary fiction mixed with noir, detective, and sci-fi/fantasy, while on the run from the Empiricists in

power after an elevator under her care spontaneously fails, Lila Mae discovers her name in James Fulton's journals, a man who wrote the book (literally) on Intuitionism.

Zone One, on the other hand, presents Mark Spitz, the main character, in the middle of a zombie apocalypse in the Northeast part of the United States. In an imaginative era decidedly similar to our present, the storyline takes place over a span of three days with several flashbacks. From Mark Spitz running away from his home, to finding himself with two other survivors sweeping New York City for zombies, the narrative's nonlinear qualities form my frustrations. While the rest of the country grows absorbed in the idea of the "American Phoenix," which shows the resilience of the American people even post-apocalyptically, Mark Spitz tries to get through his newfound mental disorder, Post-Apocalyptic Survivor Dysfunction.

In addition to his novels, Whitehead's sardonicism continues throughout his works. In his *New York Times* piece perfectly titled "Rules For Writing", Whitehead engages his wit to sardonically "teach" aspiring authors how to write. Three chief examples of his sardonicism mixing with his desire to challenge the literary world occur in rules one, two, and eight. Rule number one states that "when writers put their work out into the world, they're like kids bringing their broken unicorns and chewed-up teddy bears into class in the sad hope that someone else will love them as much as they do," which sets the mocking tone immediately (Whitehead). His derision toward common writing advice explains the choice to mock both genre fiction and literary fiction through

using elements from the other, as well as using sardonicism to scorn systems of oppression. Further proof of his sardonic writing style comes from rule number two, which says that inspiration for a topic should find the author, not the other way around; truly, “your ideal subject should be like a stalker with limitless resources, living off the inheritance he received after the suspiciously sudden death of his father” (Whitehead). And finally, rule number eight “is secret”, which completely underscores Whitehead’s sarcasm and aversion toward non-satirical writing rules for authors (Whitehead). Whitehead’s sardonicism extends past *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* to shorter pieces and articles he writes.

This shows his commitment to the issues he tackles, as well as his belief in mocking the American oppressive systems at play today. Whitehead’s sardonicism positions his negative attitudes as not just a way to ridicule without construction; the sardonicism functions to construct fantasies that operate within the guidelines of reality, while also stepping just outside of it. Meaning that when Whitehead creates rules for writing that many other authors have done, he mimics the style while immediately exaggerating their intentions. Elmore Leonard, known for writing westerns and crime fiction, wrote his own “10 Rules for Good Writing”, and his most important rule that he declares sums up all ten advises “if it sounds like writing, I rewrite it” (“Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hooptedoodle”). This additional *New York Times* published good writing rules sets a different tone; these rules make demands of

writers while not relinquishing any control over to the individual. Leonard's instructions create a tone that demands to be listened to. Whitehead's rules instead mimic the style and then instantly the reader knows he aims not for the serious, but for the critique of authors who try to declare omnipotence in the field.

Whitehead's sardonicism belongs to a larger style of writing adopted by authors of color in the last couple of decades. Ramon Saldívar created the term "postrace aesthetic" in relation to how authors like Whitehead use contemporary narration. Whitehead's contribution to a new and different literature leans on the mixing of literary and genre fictions as well as the employment of sardonicism found in the novels. This falls in line with Saldívar's postrace aesthetic. His work embraces the desire for something new and more attune to the problems facing people of color in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century America. *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* do not fit classic understandings of African American literature, but instead participate in a literature that grimly mocks this racial moment in history.

The current racial moment surrounds the idea of post-raciality. Kathryn Gines, citing the published lecture *The Post-Racial Ideal* by Howard McGary, boils postracial ("PR") down as three main components: PR1 posits "a postracial society as a version of assimilationism," PR2 believes in "a postracial United States as one in which we move beyond race and see persons as individuals insofar as the negative aspects of U.S. history regarding race are behind us," and PR3 upholds "the postracial ideal as an endorsement of the colorblind principle" ("A Critique of Postracialism" 74). A postracial society relies

on assimilating people of color into a more mainstream identity, eliminating race as a way to identify individuals, and demanding society to ignore the color of people's skin. Whitehead's writing fights the ideals established by postracialism because of their fundamental falsehoods. The world does not look like this. The United States has not attained postraciality. The literature coming out of this builds on historic struggles of black Americans in order to project a new comprehension of what needs to be done moving forward.

According to Saldívar specifically now, the following four features represent the postrace aesthetic. The first feature says that "postrace aesthetics is in critical dialogue with the aesthetics of postmodernism", which Whitehead adheres to through engaging with many of the features of postmodernism (4). *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* simultaneously critiques all of the features of postmodernism; because the books include many of the standard features, like intertextuality and metafiction, they follow the aesthetics of postmodernism, but they do so in a way that negates and challenges these traits through narrative and plot elements. Considering that part of postmodernism contains the ideal of acknowledging that the story written *is* about stories, *The Intuitionist* accommodates this. At one point in the narrative, a former Empiricist turned Intuitionist campaign manager, Mr. Reed and Lila Mae discuss the concept of the "black box" that James Fulton mentioned in his *Theoretical Elevators*, which holds the belief that the next step in elevation would be "construct[ing] an elevator from the elevator's point of view" (62). This exemplifies postmodernism because this allegorically stands in for the

promotion of the creation of a world accommodating to people of color by using the ideas of people of color, instead of white institutions making decisions for communities of color.

The primary type of genre play found in *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* adheres to the second aspect of the postrace aesthetic, which asserts that the “postrace aesthetics draws on the history of genres and typically mixes generic forms” (“The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative” 4). The use of the genres of science-fiction/fantasy, detective fiction, noir, zombie, and post-apocalyptic constructed in these two novels superimposes literary fiction as a template. Done to interact with concepts of race and postraciality, the mixing of generic and literary forms work together to enhance, challenge, and engage in a critical dialogue with each other. Also seen in *The Intuitionist*, when Lila Mae makes the decision that she “want[s] to find the black box”, which represents a shift in her character (Whitehead 65). Lila Mae throughout the narrative up to this point often minimizes her own importance and self-worth, desiring anonymity despite making waves politically. Lila Mae’s pervasive nature often means no one wants her around, but this becomes the turning point in which she decides she wants more for and from her life. This mixes genres in the way that this begins the detective and noir fiction elements in the novel, as well as sticking with the fantasy of the black box.

Saldívar also coined the term “speculative realism”, which he proposes “as a way of getting at the revision of realism and fantasy into speculative forms that are seeming to

shape the invention of new narrative modes in contemporary fiction” (3). Since the third feature of “postrace aesthetics is invested in speculative realism”, *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*’s narrative mode of conflating the narrator and the main character fits in with speculative realism (5). The narrative mode found across Whitehead’s novels and genres used shows that these books belong to the group of revolutionary books creating new ways to critique the world. *Zone One* works to create scenes that not only consolidate the narrator and main character, but that establish Mark Spitz’s New York City as not as far in the future as when most post-apocalyptic stories take place. Shown toward the end of the novel when either Mark Spitz or the narrator describes the mass of zombies as if “the ocean had overtaken the streets, as if the news programs’ global warming simulations had finally come to pass and the computer-generated swells mounted to drown the great metropolis” (Whitehead 302). This stands as just one example where cleaving the narrator from Mark Spitz proves difficult. Who tells us this? Furthermore, the mention of previous global warming simulations, which present-day news stations show these in reality on our televisions, violates the futuristic setting in which one assumes *Zone One* takes places. Our current day does not obviously stand as far apart from this setting after all.

Since *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* use race as a primary and secondary theme, the books heed the fourth feature, which states “postrace aesthetics explores the thematic of race in twenty-first century America” (Saldívar 5). The novels explore late twentieth century and early twenty-first century America, with respect to historical themes of race

and genre. They create extreme circumstances in the novels in order to make racial tensions and racial extremes (and subtleties) stand out in the narratives. Since *Zone One*'s time setting establishes its relevancy in critiquing race relations in twenty-first century America, the following question that the merged narrator/main character asks insinuates the novel's themes about race:

Why else were they in Manhattan but to transport the *old ways* across the *violent* passage of the calamity to the safety of the other side? If you don't believe that, Mark Spitz asked himself, why are you here? [italics added] 59.

This passage implies that the "old ways" refer to a time when postraciality reigned. The violence relates to the violence occurring in our supposed postracial world. In a world that cannot acknowledge racial issues because survival remains a predominant focus, institutions ignore the racism that rests inside all of the people remaining in the United States. These issues did not disappear with the animation of the zombies. Merely hidden, racism and capitalism still reign supreme in this world.

The books' delineations consistently confounding me. I found *The Intuitionist* an easier read because of its straightforward plot, which its emphasis on dialogue and explanatory, secondary character story arcs reinforce. The plot and dialogue build on Lila Mae's experiences, creating an effortless read. But this ease is deceptive, as *The Intuitionist*'s nuanced narrative complicates the undemanding surface of the novel. The story ultimately negates itself as it sets up Lila Mae as a great heroine, and then destroys this narrative through explaining the reason Lila Mae, and the reader, believes she is

special; James Fulton wrote down her name in his journal, which turns out to just be the scribbles of a senile, old man. She is not the hero of this story; Lila Mae's life largely comprises incidents of coincidence. Furthermore, the flashbacks of memories Lila Mae probably does not remember and the secondary story arcs manifest confusion that do not piece together cleanly with the larger story, especially in light of the negation of the entire story.

I read *The Intuitionist* much quicker compared to *Zone One* because of its easy to follow storyline; the deceptive nature applies to when the novel switches Lila Mae's purpose from one of great importance to one of minimal glory. *Zone One*, on the other hand for me, summoned a journey of exploration of whether or not I could actually finish a book I would spend the semester writing about. I felt it was Colson Whitehead's personal mission to write books that appealed to me, and then immediately make sure I would struggle in reading and analyzing them. I struggled with *Zone One* because of the huge swathes of the inner thoughts of Mark Spitz, and the corresponding minimal dialogue between any of the characters. The book also has minimal plot development, with no clear purpose or point to the story; and characters who are fairly one-dimensional and do not develop as I flip through the pages. Because *The Intuitionist* shows that Whitehead possesses the ability to write multi-dimensional characters, his choice to create *Zone One*'s characters as flat feels intentional. This is the beginning source for sardonicism found within Whitehead's stories.

Whitehead's choice of using sardonicism in his novels is the dominant mode he critiques white power structures and its associated capitalist institutions. Sardonicism generates an outlet for the frustration and impotence marginalized communities experience at the hands of these forces. Sardonicism grants access to communicating about issues that affect all marginalized people through mirroring the oppression that exists on an institutional level. While personal discrimination exists, and *Zone One* and *The Intuitionist* cover the individual discrimination, the larger source is systematic. In a description of zombies found in *Zone One*:

The damned bubbled and frothed on the most famous street in the world, the dead things still proudly indicating, despite their grime and wounds and panoply of leaking orifices, the tribes to which they had belonged, in gray pinstriped suits, classic rock T-shirts, cowboy boots, dashikis, striped cashmere cardigans, fringed suede vests, plush jogging suits. What they had died in. (302).

Whitehead illustrates the type of people the zombies used to be before infection hijacked their bodies. While the zombies are individuals, Whitehead plays on stereotypes and cultural understandings of people. The zombies are simply not that different from the way they were before infection. The tribes the zombies previously belonged to are assigned through their clothing, but nothing about their personalities. Tribal membership holds the most importance in their undead lives. The "gray pinstriped suits" belonging to the business tribe; "classic rock T-shirts" portraying a grungy group longing for the past; folks holding onto rural, country life regardless if they have ever lived in pastoral

settings; immigrants and people of color seeking ancestral, cultural experiences; the people who possess large sums of money, while attempting to look casual; neo-hippies who probably wore star-shaped sunglasses and smoked a lot of marijuana; and the people wanting to be perceived as fit and comfortably wealthy.

Whitehead breaks down and separates these groups in order to show that even in zombie form, these former people are just like us. They may all be zombies, but Whitehead is critiquing a very important aspect of modern culture here. Patricia Chu in *Race, Nationalism and the State in British and American Modernism*, declares the zombie as a convergence of “modern labor, marital consent as a model for democratic consent, and U.S. ‘democratic occupation [of Haiti]’” (5). These converging experiences create the zombie, “a monster that resembles a normal human, that has lost control over its own thoughts and actions and may not even realize its own loss of agency” (5). The narrative of a zombie’s lack of cognizance of its condition can be found in almost all iteration of the creatures in *Zone One*. Whitehead’s zombies mirror twenty-first century Americans. We come from an assortment of backgrounds, migrating and consuming like zombies. *Zone One* thus becomes an entirely different story—there is no difference between those declared as zombies by the narrative and those not because, as Chu said, the modern, consumer zombie knows not of its own loss of agency. We become zombies who “stalk the cities of modernism, where newly emergent methods of liberal-democratic interventionist government” increase in visibility, which is the exact kind of government

created in Buffalo, New York in *Zone One* (5). Pushing the propaganda of the “American Phoenix”, this emerging government begins implementing neoliberal concepts in the form of the same kind of stabilization and structural adjustment programs invoked within the 1970s and 80s in developing nations. *Zone One*’s world operates within the paradigm of neoliberalism especially in relation to inequality. *The New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* says that while “politically, neoliberalism accepts that individuals are formally equal and that they possess civil liberties that should be respected and protected”, in practice “inequalities are seen as a major impetus to maximizing individual self-interest because inequalities require greater exertion and effort to acquire the most from the market” (1626). In other words, inequalities act only as blockades to effective *laissez-faire* economic and societal systems. They must be removed in order to protect the zombies that form as a result of modernism.

The Intuitionist tackles a different variety of zombie, shown when Lila Mae considers her idol, James Fulton, and his last years before his death. She remembers Fulton’s behavior labeled “‘eccentric’”, which she then notes, “‘eccentric’ being a word (...) that white people use to describe crazy white people of stature” (Whitehead 83). To Lila Mae, this proves a few things, such as that “white people cover their own” and that she “does not expect human beings to conduct themselves in any other way but how they truly are. Which is weak” (84). Lila Mae, like Mark Spitz, identifies for herself the different and often opposing groups. There is distinct separation between white and black folks in *The Intuitionist*, and Lila Mae’s bitterness toward the treatment coming from the

white “tribe” presents the kind of sardonicism within Whitehead’s first novel. Her lumping together of all humans as “weak,” shows the cynicism and disdain present in the Whitehead’s sardonic narratives. Humans are ultimately all the same, despite “tribal” allegiances; we are all zombies working within oppressive institutions.

This is not the only way to portray groups, effects of neoliberalism, and the correlating sardonicism, as seen in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Díaz put just as much effort into generating a complex, inner narrative of his main characters as Whitehead, but uses footnotes in *Oscar Wao* to represent much of his narrator’s musings:

6. Where this outsized love of genre jumped of from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who’s more sci-fi than us?) or living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both). (21-22)

Díaz uses varying techniques within literature and academia such as footnotes, and forces genre fiction elements into it, which Whitehead strives similarly to do. This specific passage illuminates Díaz’s genre fiction choices, his use of the vernacular, while utilizing an academic and literary element such as a footnote. The narrator, Yuniors, works to provide thorough explanations throughout *Oscar Wao* about key historical and cultural moments for people from the Dominican. Here, Yuniors, describes a few key cultural

moments experienced by many immigrants from developing nations. By using an indirect narration through Yunió, Díaz discusses a displacement, a change of category of people. He demands attention to the narratives of people that are not often written about directly. Just as Whitehead must write about modern people and systems of oppression through the allegory of zombies and postapocalypse, Díaz must make direct conversations about the immigrant experience nuanced in order to avoid openly critiquing systems of oppression.

Moreover, both passages group the displaced parties into their respective tribes, while still largely belonging with either their fellow zombies or fellow Antilleans. This causes confusion for the reader, as the ideas of forced migration and displaced populations can only be found within a postcolonial, capitalist world. While Díaz employs the humorous question of “who is more sci-fi than us?” in reference to being Dominican, he manipulates the genre of science fiction in order to critique the relationship between tribal associations and the consequences of coming from a non-white part of the Western Hemisphere. These consequences relate to the difficulties of being an immigrant, belonging to a “tribe” not considered desirable, and participating in cultural experiences outside of the ones your “tribe” ordinarily participates in, i.e., science fiction. Díaz creates a narrative about Dominican immigrants by equating them to a genre permeated by white authors. This relates to Colson Whitehead in a couple of ways: first, that Whitehead attempts to accomplish similar goals to Díaz through using

elements of genre fiction in his literary fiction level novels, and second is the sardonicism executed to focus in on the struggles of communities of color.

With zombies, elevator inspectors, and science fiction in mind, the presentation of the following questions incite more thought. Whitehead does something interesting in his novels, and it relates with racial and economic tensions. Zombies and elevator inspectors are stand-ins for real groups of people; the representations complicate the expectations held about fiction and marginalized populations. Whitehead's novels are difficult to read and break down in digestible bites, but the challenge of understanding lies still ahead. It is through a subsequent number of questions, and their corresponding answers moving forward, that Colson Whitehead's writing will grow in clarity. Why write novels that create challenges in understanding for readers? Why are *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* manipulating literary and genre fiction? What are *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*'s ultimate goals in incorporating genre elements in sardonic ways?

The problems Colson Whitehead and other authors of color address in their novels surround issues of the institutional racism at work in the United States today. They try hard to rebel against the status quo in literature and society through employing sardonicism in their novels. This dark humor allows *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* to criticize subtly; they deconstruct the current racial moment, illuminating society and literature's need to shift away from a blatant and public decry of white individuals and toward understated sardonicism that criticizes white discriminatory institutions.

Positioning Colson Whitehead historically, as a facet of understanding his choice of

sardonicism and genre fiction, can help situate him within African American literature. The novels shift away from admonishing white supremacy in favor of understated mocking of the same denunciation African American literature historically engaged in. Participating in this public decry entailed laying out all the ways people of color experienced oppression and discrimination at the hands of white institutions. The public denunciation of the white establishment aimed to be a discussion of sorts, to show the people how their actions affected people of color and to change behavior and the corresponding laws.

According to Kenneth Warren, this brand of progressive, upbraiding literature exists almost exclusively under the dark cloud of the Jim Crow Era. For instance, Warren explains “under Jim Crow, by helping to draw attention to the wrongs of segregation, the literary artists who gave us African-American literature assisted in establishing a politics based on appealing to a white-power structure,” and these authors created necessary literature that drew attention to the horrors of segregation imposed by white culture (“Does African-American Literature Exist?”). African American literature’s strengths rely on adhering strictly to literary fiction as a result of Jim Crow segregation era writing, but these older ways of communicating critiques of racial moments grow exhausted. The reason for believing this is the continuing power structures that actively oppress and work against people of color. The United States may have elected a black man as president, but institutions still employ predominantly white administrators, incarceration rates among communities of color is significantly higher than white populations, and the housing

market continues to discriminate against these marginalized communities either through high interest loans or the displacement caused by gentrification. So when Warren says that authors of color like Colson Whitehead are “by the criteria we use to determine matters of racial identity [...] may indeed be African-American. The works they've written, however, are not,” he ultimately refers to the methods of engagement Whitehead uses, i.e., sardonicism and genre fiction, as not adhering to traditional methods used by African American authors in the previous racial moment (Warren). So what does it mean that Whitehead is not writing African American literature as a black man?

The Intuitionist and *Zone One* do not engage in the old ways of communicating in fiction because they no longer work to achieve the kind of justice needed in the current racial moment. And if openly and loudly vilifying white systems of oppression and the people in power that continue to support and propagate racist culture no longer accomplishes the goals wanted from progressive, modern social justice movements, then a new method of writing becomes needed.

Pursuant to this, Michelle Alexander argues that “the arguments and rationalizations that have been trotted out in support of racial exclusion and discrimination in its various forms have changed and evolved” in the decades since the end of Jim Crow, but “the outcome has remained largely the same” (*The New Jim Crow* 1). Alexander makes this claim through citing the myriad of discrimination practices black men, specifically, continue to face through the large swathes that have been incarcerated. In Washington, D.C., and found similarly in other black communities in the

United States, “it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison” (6-7). I present this in order to illustrate that while Jim Crow-style segregation no longer exists, and obvious discrimination and racism is largely discouraged, the white supremacist government implemented new forms of racialized social control via prison systems. The reason Warren’s African American literature no longer exists is because that literature relies on overt racial social control, which “in the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don’t” (2). Society instead uses felonies as a basis to legally discriminate against people of color, in other words, the largest incarcerated population. Thus, there is still a need for progressive literature in light of newly formed racist practices. This progressive literature will instead uncover the complexities within the current systems of injustice. Jim Crow did not truly end, it just evolved and manifests differently now.

Using Whitehead’s first novel *The Intuitionist* from 1999 and his more recent 2011 novel *Zone One* as the basis for analysis of his writing, I argue the elements of genre fiction in Whitehead’s writing functions as a mode of literary and societal reform. The relationship linking these two lies in the sardonicism of institutional racism; when mocking racial tensions in a false past and capitalism in a not-too-distant future, Whitehead critiques literature’s lack and society’s mishandling of these issues. Modern

literature does not often address racial tensions, unless it is by other authors of color; and society inhibits progress to be made addressing these tensions. The setting of different time periods in the novels contrast with the current racial moment of assumed postraciality. *The Intuitionist*'s racism is blatant with Pompey's boss kicking him while he was bent over, and with the staggered enrollment and segregation of students of color at the Institute for Vertical Transport (Whitehead 25 & 44). *The Intuitionist* represents a past in which racism was an understood aspect of life, contrasting with the current era of postraciality. On the other side of time, *Zone One* projects a deeper postraciality than supposed in the present; discrimination exists outside of white people's radars, seen when Gary does not know of the stereotype that black people cannot swim (247). Whereas, in the contemporary moment, stereotypes still thrive even in light of a post-racial society. Here, sardonicism acts in a two-fold manner to show its necessity in African American literature. Sardonicism is necessary in light of postraciality that actively ignores the struggles of people of color.

Previous African American literature throughout history is predicated on the aforementioned denouncing of oppressive institutions, in which black authors publicly defied white and capitalist power structures in a straightforward and obvious manner. W.E.B. DuBois represents a great example of the culture that participated in openly condemning oppression. According to DuBois's "Strivings of the Negro People" from 1897 in reference to a childhood experience with white kids, "it dawned upon [DuBois]

with a certain suddenness that [he] was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil” (DuBois). DuBois avidly projects the emotions he possessed when he noticed his differences and when he noticed that the majority of the world did not belong to him. The vast majority of the white world hidden from view by a “vast veil”, which calls attention to the veil exists in the first place. As an African American man, his limited control over his own experiences and choices directly relates to his identities. African Americans did not select a life of oppression, and DuBois directs close scrutiny to this. After slavery’s outlaw, and then actual cultural banishment, “the holocaust of war, the terrors of the Ku Klux Klan, the lies of the carpet-baggers, the disorganization of industry, and the contradictory advice of friends and foes left the bewildered serf with no new watchword beyond the old cry for freedom”, which outlines the fallout of the system of slavery graced African Americans with (DuBois). He outwardly demonizes the causes for these repercussions as they leave members of his community without resources and support. DuBois’s tone often leaves a reader sensing the “very bottom of hardships” encountered by the “poor race in a land of dollars” (DuBois). As this land hoards its dollars and dominates over its people of color, the literature responding to it must project the dismal nature of the subjugation of African Americans.

However, to a modern, progressive, social justice movement, this method proves ineffectual. Whitehead suggests that racist institutions still exist today through the juxtaposing time periods discussed earlier; because racist outbursts found in the past do

not occur and society has not progressed to the point of unknowing stereotypes, then the current racial moment must be one of a middle ground between these two points. Just as black men today are “subject to legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service, just as their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents once were” shows, a shift has occurred in the United States that sets apart black men today from their ancestors (Alexander 2). The Jim Crow era established the rules for discrimination, and the “new” Jim Crow follows the ideals set forth by the segregation time period. This necessitates an alternative, which to Colson Whitehead, and other authors of color like Junot Díaz, means engaging in sardonic storytelling. Grimly mocking issues like white supremacy, capitalism, and the corresponding violence and racism, permits for a subtlety the exact opposite of the denouncement of oppressive institutions embodied by earlier African American literature. Sardonicism grants Whitehead’s work the ability to critique parts of Western culture without taking a blatantly aggressive stance, because the mocking and insurrectionary writing must exist on a similar level as the discrimination. If the white supremacist power structures discriminate in a subversive manner, then the critique must use sardonicism as an incendiary tool to combat the institutions. The shift from the group culture among African American authors to combat racism through illuminating the problematic of white supremacy, to subtle sardonicism mimics the change to a postracial society, where racism exists only in the minds of older generations and in the naive complaints of a younger one.

Whitehead and Díaz did not create the concept of using genre fiction to build on racial elements originating with writers like DuBois; Octavia Butler won two Hugo Awards and two Nebula Awards, which are two of the most prominent awards to be won for science fiction authors. Butler received a MacArthur Genius Grant and was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame posthumously. By all accounts, Butler excelled at writing science fiction genre fiction. Butler published her first novels of *The Patternist* series in the 1970s, and continued to write until her death in 2006. Butler embodies the antecedent to Whitehead and Díaz; she planted the seeds of mixing genre fiction, literary fiction, and societal commentary that would blossom for twenty-first century authors of color. At the World Conference Against Racism, Butler gave a speech where she makes the bold claim that “nothing. Nothing at all” would make the world “more tolerant, more peaceful, less likely to need a UN Conference on Racism” (“A World Without Racism”). This falls in line with much of the sardonicism found in *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*; both of the novels carry the same heavy pessimism Butler evokes in her speech.

Between Lila Mae’s belief that all human beings are weak and the “popular amusement” in *Zone One* of the sweepers practicing “skel mutilation” (Whitehead 101). Mark Spitz/the narrator explains that “a neutralized skel was a perfect stage for one’s sadism”, and these examples show the cynicism found in these novels (101). These two books mirror a lot of what Butler believed her own works to embody, and how she perceived the world. Butler chalks her pessimism to “simple peck-order bullying”, which she reports as “only the beginning of the kind of hierarchical behavior that can lead to

racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, and all the other ‘isms’ that cause so much suffering in the world” (“A World Without Racism”). Taking this representation of bullying as true, then the bullying of people of color and of zombies in any form in *The Intuitionist*, *Zone One*, and the real world account for all the “isms” that plague the United States.

The reason Octavia Butler’s importance plays such a key role when looking at Whitehead lies not only in what she says at conferences, but what she says in her novels. The first page from *Parable of the Sower*, Butler’s 1993 novel beginning the *Earthseed* series, from the fictional “Earthseed: The Books of the Living” reads “all that you touch/You Change./All that you Change/Changes you./The only lasting truth/Is Change./God/Is Change” (2). Both of Whitehead’s novels here rely on change, or the hope for change. Lila Mae and James Fulton wish(ed) to create change and to fit into a world that did not want to change. Mark Spitz’s world maintains change as the only reliable event; and in this world of tumultuous variation, Mark Spitzs thrives. All of these characters depend on change to make their lives better, and the situations available to them elicit the kinds of change Lila Mae and Mark Spitz need. Lila Mae needs to feel important and valued; she desires being viewed as someone who can lead her people to the future through the next innovation in elevators. Mark Spitz, described essentially as painfully average and boring, craves the action that fighting zombies brings him; he

flourishes in the post-apocalyptic world he finds himself in and becomes the person he never knew he could be.

In addition to the use of genre fiction and change, Butler incorporates issues of race into her stories as well. Much in the same fashion Whitehead uses time setting to critique race, Butler's post-apocalyptic scenery of *Parable of the Sower* discusses race in an upfront manner. Lauren Oya Olamina, the novel's main character begins the story as a child and the majority of people she encounters are children as well. As a result, she experiences the kind of racism only younger people do, such as when discussing families in her neighborhood: "the Garfields and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days. On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind, but with all of us armed and watchful, people stared, but they let us alone" (44). Lauren's observations about race shape the novel; her understandings of how she operates in a world still obsessed with the color of her skin persists despite the science fiction elements in the novel. Lauren may be an empath, and the world around her may be falling apart, and she may have started her own religion, but racism and misogyny weigh heavy on her character development. In Butler's works and in Whitehead's, science fiction is just an outlet, a way of communicating the distress of larger social issues and critiquing them.

Colson Whitehead's novels cannot be categorized with ease; *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* retain qualities of genre fiction and literary fiction, while also failing to meet

the standards of either level of fiction. This violates how Warren says African American literature has been systematically measured. In other words, “literary work by black writers came to be discussed in terms of how well it served (or failed to serve) as an instrument in the fight against Jim Crow (...) or the nation’s progress in accepting African Americans as full and equal citizens” (“Does African American Literature Exist?”). Since Jim Crow does not explicitly exist in the same framework Warren judges African American literary works, then Whitehead’s works would seem to fail this measurement. According to James Harold the attributes that make and break both genre fiction and literary fiction, is “if a work is intended by the author to belong to a particular genre or category, but it lacks a sufficient number of standard features of that category (or it has too many contra-standard features)” (Harold). For genre fiction, success relies on an author’s use of common tropes found within the specific genre of the piece, like “that the protagonist of a whodunit is a detective who attempts to solve the crime” (Harold). But when contra-standard features are used, like “when the narrator is himself the killer” in a genre akin to the previous standard feature, this use attracts a reader’s attention—grabbing and demanding to be paid attention to (Harold). The danger of using contra-standard features in genre fiction especially lies in when a fan of that genre, for instance a zombie fiction novel like *Zone One*, picks up the novel and misunderstands the key arguments in it. Curtis Dawkins, in his Prison Review of Whitehead’s zombie novel from *BULL*, declares that “if you are thinking of venturing into the fashionable zombie-apocalypse trend, don’t make *Zone One* your first foray into this decomposing world”

(Dawkins). He says this as a warning because of “the nebulous nature of this narrative” that he believes “is meant to pass for ‘literary’” (Dawkins). The function of this misunderstanding lies in the belief most white American possess of postraciality. If the United States exists within an assimilationist, eliminativist, and colorblind mindset, then the primary critiques of a racial novel would soar over the head of someone ascribing with that same society. I bring this review of *Zone One* up in combination with Harold’s ideas about standards of literature to show that when a reader expects certain standard features of the fiction to be present, and then contra-standard features instead replace the common, difficulty in understanding the novel arises. I argue that Whitehead does not aim for his novels to be highly accessible by the average reader, simply through his use of the literary. His novels “fail” traditional understandings of both literature and genre fiction as a result, but failure does not spell disaster for these novels. Rather, failure aligns with the ambition of the novels. The novels do not aim to be understood by white, middle class folks who are not traditionally considered marginalized. These narrative reach out to fail in order to find their target audiences of people who would think critically about the systems in place that further impoverish and limit people of color.

In terms of mixing and violating standard features of genre fiction and literary fiction, these two books succeed in doing both. The motives behind the mixing and violation, returns to using sardonicism to combat postraciality. In the same way that the outward and blatant protest of the treatment of people of color is bringing about the sardonic undertones in racial novels to contrast between the two, postraciality demands

attention through the mixing of fictions. *The Intuitionist*'s use of allegory to show racial tensions strives to inform an audience about issues within society. Accomplished through the reversal of expectations about the hero in the novel, *The Intuitionist* forces its audience to pay attention to what would cause such a reversal. This leads to thinking back about the narrative more than a story that did not violate its own heroic trope, and running through the novel more than once illuminates the mocking of postraciality. Furthermore, the reversal of the expected plot trope of Lila Mae heralded as an amazing detective and heroine stands to be the contra-standard feature that complicates the novel wrapping up neatly and cleanly. In contrast, *Zone One*'s elements of literary fiction present as long, dry passages that appear to not move the plot forward. But its mix with genre fiction opens up the novel to positive criticism over the consistent negative provided so far. Min Hyoung Song, in his review of Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea*, refers back to Lee's first novel *Native Speaker*, describing it as "tak[ing] liberties with the genre by centering character, setting, and style over plot. This slows the pace down, letting the novel go deep in a way popular storytelling — which is usually, by contrast, focused on what happens next — cannot do as well" (Song). Other books by authors of color work to do the same thing Whitehead does. This means there is a set of people writing stories that constantly violate expectations of the literary and genre fiction. *Zone One* works to motion similar elements more found in literature, like character setting, and style, over touting plot movement commonly instituted in genre

fiction settles Whitehead as more literary than genre. At least in *Zone One*. While it is a zombie apocalypse novel that has zombies in various forms and operates in a post-apocalyptic world, “it is very much removed from [the genre], halfheartedly rehearsing some of its more prominent tropes without adding much to its repertoire of conventions” (Song). This observation proves important because of the return to the earlier concept of the zombies in *Zone One* are not trying to be the zombies of the genre, but rather serve as representations of Americans outside of the novel. These zombies do not try to reach to eat the brains of any person who comes across their paths; these zombies are consumers. Shown further in Whitehead’s descriptions of his zombies, or skels, he reports “most skels, they moved. They came to eat you--not all of you, but a nice chomp here or there, enough to pass on the plague,” which illustrates that Whitehead’s zombie are figureheads standing in for greater metaphorical purposes (60). They are the zombies consumerism and capitalism created.

Conversely, *The Intuitionist* completes a different narrative between the struggle of genre fiction or literary fiction for Whitehead’s works. This novel mixes many categories within genre fiction to begin with, proving its more successful portrayal of genre fiction’s standard features. It is a detective novel, noir, science fiction, and fantasy; the novel fulfills many of the tropes found in most of these novels, except one key aspect already discussed: Lila Mae does not figure out the mystery, but she does not know this. She knows a lot though, and the novel’s plot advances fairly streamlined, which matches

expectations for genre fiction. Additionally, the word choices and manner the narrator characterizes the black box, the secret creation of James Fulton to continue the elevation of mankind. Within this invention, a world full of opportunity presents itself, and “in the black box, this messy business of human communication is reduced to excreted chemicals, understood by the soul’s receptors and translated into true speech” (Whitehead 87). The black box opens up the possibility for progress and advancement for everyone in the novel’s alternative universe, but especially for the people of color. The use of a misguided detective figure and the entire concept of *feeling* an elevator’s ills signify *The Intuitionist*’s blend of genres as well as its blend of character, theme, and plot. Plot progression serves as a foundational element in Whitehead’s elevator novel versus his zombie novel, which the main characters in each novel echo. Mark Spitz experiences minimal character development outside of his realization at the end of the story that lifts him from his mediocre personality traits into a brave soul willing to dive into the zombie hoard. This reflects *Zone One*’s minimal plot development, and expects the reader to understand the sardonicism aimed largely at capitalism. Lila Mae Watson, though, begins as an emotionally and socially distant woman, ascends to a woman filled with courage and drive, and ends on a mission to infiltrate the narrative surrounding the invention of the black box to ghost-write her own third book “by” James Fulton. She moves quickly, and her character development marks the similarities between her and the novel as a whole. The main characters directly correlate to their novels styles, themes, and plots (or lack thereof).

But why does it matter that Whitehead mixes his generic forms? Return to the second feature of Saldívar's postrace aesthetic, which says that for a work or an author to fit within the description of a postrace aesthetic, the work or author must "draw on the history of genres and typically mixes generic forms" (4). *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* actually *rely* on the histories behind their respective genres; the novels serve and understand their foundation in authors like W.E.B. DuBois and Octavia Butler. An additional complication of these novels threads throughout both of them; they do not want to be literary, and they do not care about genre. The focus depends more on the history and the predecessors of the status of paraliterary. Jeffrey Allen Tucker asserts that "as with 'whiteness,' it is often difficult to define 'literature' without reference to what the term excludes" ("'Verticality Is Such a Risky Enterprise': The Literary and Paraliterary Antecedents of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*" 148). Historically, "literature" excludes any works written by people of color, and specifically in the United States, African Americans. This is why writers that precede Whitehead grow more important when looking at *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*. As defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, paraliterature qualifies as a "category of written works relegated to the margins of recognized literature and often dismissed as subliterary despite evident resemblances to the respectable literature of the recognized canon" (Baldick). Since the genres Whitehead works within qualify within the realms of paraliterature, this responds to what literature is not as Tucker brings up. *The Intuitionist*

and *Zone One* complicate, challenge, and demand more from literature while at first glance appear to be paraliterary, genre fiction.

The novels do not exist in the realm of appealing to literature's whiteness. Roxane Gay, in an article she wrote for *The Rumpus*, investigated the ethnicities of the authors reviewed by the *New York Times* in 2011. The results match the expectations Gay hypothesized:

We looked at 742 books reviewed, across all genres. Of those 742, 655 were written by Caucasian authors (1 transgender writer, 437 men, and 217 women). Thirty-one were written by Africans or African Americans (21 men, 10 women), 9 were written by Hispanic authors (8 men, 1 woman), 33 by Asian, Asian-American or South Asian writers (19 men, 14 women), 8 by Middle Eastern writers (5 men, 3 women) and 6 were books written by writers whose racial background we were simply unable to identify. ("Where Things Stand").

Literature and whiteness go hand in hand. Books written by Butler, Díaz, and Whitehead represent a shift away from the strict correlation of literature and whiteness. They aim not for the literary, because of its racial overtones. Instead, their books embrace the paraliterary, generic forms. As Roxane Gay's study shows, novels considered "literary" do not often include people of color as authors.

The Intuitionist mirrors this reality in Lila Mae's profession where progress horrifies the white, Empiricist men to death. Shown when critiques run amok in regards

to “the messy rise of Intuitionism, or the growing numbers of women and colored people in the Guild”; and Lila Mae typifies all of these identities, “three times cursed” (20). Lila Mae’s coworkers and predecessors set an obvious precedent that actively excludes women and people of color. Their whiteness and maleness also demands those of marginalized identities to assimilate, to embody the same qualities they do. This corresponds with postraciality, which depends on a society desiring for assimilationism. The white institutions at power within *The Intuitionist* rely on ideas that race does not matter, and thus can be readily ignored in order to preserve their conservatism. They do not want the change that came with the “increasingly vocal colored population” in their nameless city (12). But to the white citizens of this large city, progress is a capitalist endeavor and not one of racial equity. For instance, the narrator states that

Everyone thinks, as they must, of last summer’s riots, of last summer’s riots, of how strange it was to live in a metropolis such as this (magnificent elevated trains, five daily newspapers, two baseball stadiums) and yet be too afraid to leave the house. How quickly things can fall into medieval disorder. (23).

So not only do the citizens of this “metropolis” not understand that progress does not automatically mean having enough taxpayer money to afford an elevated rail system and two baseball teams/stadiums, but they equate civil disobedience to riots and “medieval disorder.” This associates the communities of color, which protested their ill treatment the summer before, with people from The Dark Ages who did not possess the kind of innovation and perceived higher thinking relative to modern day. The city views this

population as lesser, and even though the Mayor named a new huge building after Fanny Briggs, a woman of color heroine in their community, racial tensions still soar. But white institutional progress feels satisfied by capitalism's grandeur; and so when communities of color do not fall at the institutions' feet in gratitude, it provides further evidence of the distinctions between ideals of the two. The city tells its African American citizens to be happy that they have a building named after an amazing woman without acknowledging the actual needs of the people. The city does not deserve a present for doing something they should have already been doing, which is especially true when all of the institutions in power in the city minimally allow marginalized populations access to any justice.

James Fulton passes as white, but his woman of color mother proves this wrong. James Fulton's ability to become such a phenomenon within the elevator inspector world relies entirely on his ability to pass for white. Lila Mae also meets the masculine expectations in her outfits, her normal uniform consisting of the "ideal triangularity" of her "tie knot" and its "grid of purple and blue squares" that "disappears near her bosom, gliding beneath the buttons of her dark blue suit" (5). Her masculine attire constitutes her adherence to the social rules of belonging to the elevator inspector world. In a world that does not accept or want her in it, she strives just to blend in, to be another one of the guys. This impossible task shapes how the reader sees the novel's main character; she works hard to assimilate, but her colleagues do not want her around and do not want her to exist.

Colson Whitehead deftly defies the standards of genre fiction, though, as well as literary fiction. He does this in addition to defying the typical portrayal of African Americans in literature, through his use of both the literary and genre fictions. Both novels endeavor to conquer genres not inherently literary, and their paraliterary genre elements and roots act as a disguise for their high literary level author. *The Intuitionist* plays this game better than *Zone One*, but the different purposes behind each book reflect the degree of achievement. The disguise works intentionally, and Whitehead's goal is not to pretend to be a genre fictional author. He calls into question the rules established as law when entering the world of literature and writing. Both of the novels critique the literary world, accomplishing this through using tropes of genre fiction and the writing style/character development found within literature. Authors of color, who want to feel connected to their literary history or pay homage to them, must look to and emulate the paraliterary/genre fiction because authors of high repute did not belong to communities of color. Society's appraisal of what stories constituted as "literary" did not extend to works written by African Americans—they were just black authors, black writers—and unquestionably not capable of constructing the same kind of writing as white novelists.

Additionally, Sandra Liggins makes the claim that "Whitehead uses an urban gothic landscape and traditional gothic conventions to portray the alienation of the modern black American due to the progress in urban cities and to speculate on the future of US race relations" ("The Urban Gothic Vision Of Colson Whitehead's 'The Intuitionist' (1999)" 360). Furthermore, Liggins says that in order to increase the

connection between *The Intuitionist* and the gothic tradition is “the manner in which Whitehead molds the notion of evil into the shape of a modern patriarchy, producing a climate of terror and seclusion that devalues not only women but blacks as well” (362). Every intentional choice made in the writing of *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* build on each other, and each one serves the purpose to mock the weaknesses and faults of various institutions. Both of these books voice the outcry of other people in the stories regarding the systems of power in play, but the conflated narrative makes it difficult to discern if Lila Mae or Mark Spitz feel disgruntled about their society’s choices. At the very least, the narrators attempt to maintain neutrality, but their disavowal of these societies’ choices can be easily found. In *Zone One*, Mark Spitz’s unit meets up with another sweeper unit, and the narrator (or Mark Spitz) tells the reader that “Mark Spitz had heard them reminisce about their time together in a bandit crew, ripping off weaker survivors for aspirin and thermal underwear and who know what other bad acts” (142-143). The storyteller here takes the time out of the narrative to inform on less-than-favorable activities by other sweeper units. Mark Spitz consistently stands apart from those who decide to take advantage of the post-apocalyptic chaos. Originally average, Mark Spitz rises above the rest.

To conclude this exposition, let us return to the three questions asked earlier in the paper. Why write novels that create challenges in understanding for readers? Why are *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* manipulating literary and genre fiction? And, what are *The*

Intuitionist and *Zone One*'s ultimate goals in incorporating genre elements in sardonic ways?

Challenging novels embody the ideals of social justice movement that asks people to evaluate their privileges and respect the differences among others. Colson Whitehead did not write essays instructing white people how to act around black people. He wrote complex narratives about fictional people, places, and situations that provoke confusion. *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* denounce systems of oppression through their narrative sardonicism. The books do not hesitate to fight against the racism and misogyny present in the real world through mocking the same sort of issues in the stories. By creating challenges for readers and crafting complicated narratives, the novels allow deeper thinking. Colson Whitehead does not write using genre fiction in order to mirror its original purposes and elements. The novels read as if the literary world already respects the genres used, and the way the narratives progress commands that kind of respect, that seriousness extended toward white, critically acclaimed works. They command that seriousness, because the reader naturally engages with the story as a means to understand the characters and plot developments. The stories exceed entertainment; they force the reader to engage and dissect their own perceptions.

As previously discussed, the exclusivity of literary fiction becomes a revolving door of the same white authors, writing the same existential-crises-based stories. Standing in opposition to the expectations of literary fiction, both of the novels try to construct a new narrative about fiction with literary status. Whitehead's books do this

through the application of genre fiction elements. All of the features of literary fiction, genre fiction, and Saldívar's postrace aesthetic collectively aspire to create more space in literature for sardonicism toward existing power structures. While Octavia Butler's novels came before Junot Díaz and Colson Whitehead's, and strived to accomplish similar goals, Whitehead's perspectives arise in a post-Butler literary moment. And this moment calls out to authors of color to continue to write enigmatic narrative that mirror and mock their own experiences.

In finality, addressing *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*'s ultimate goals rely on one motivating factor: progressive justice. Incorporating genre elements into sardonic dialogue about the current racial moment signifies an appetite for monumental change. The books do not hold aspirations for change like naming a big building after a famous hero, or the killing of zombies who could attack survivors. They covet the potential for *real* change, the kind only available through revolutionary thoughts and new ideas—a massive overhaul in society's understandings of marginalized communities and identities. Authors of color bear witness to the lack of revolution of their predecessors, those who actively participated in public, written outcries against oppressive institutions. These two novels use their paraliterary and literary ancestors as fuel for the battles that occur between the major plot and character developments. The complexities of postmodernism, postrace aesthetics, and the collaboration of genre and literary fiction vanquish adversaries and actualize progress within the fictional and real-life worlds.

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